

APNewsBreak: Federal agency settles wolf lawsuit

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ALBUQUERQUE, N.M.—The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and environmentalists reached an agreement Friday that scraps a rule the agency had used to kill or permanently remove any wolf that killed three heads of livestock in a year.

Fish and Wildlife spokesman Tom Buckley said the three-strikes rule “will no longer stand.”

The agency has other ways to deal with livestock kills “and remains committed to assisting the local livestock operators in any negative impacts they may have related to wolves,” Buckley said.

Environmentalists contended the rule favored the ranching industry and was a major roadblock to the effort to recover the species in the wild. Ranchers said the policy targeted wolves that grow accustomed to preying on cattle.

Several environmental groups sued in May 2008, asking a U.S. District Court in Arizona to stop the removal policy on the Mexican gray wolf, a subspecies of the gray wolf. Buckley said agency officials hope a judge signs the settlement next week.

Today, there are about 50 wolves in Arizona and New Mexico—half of what biologists had hoped to have by now.

The effort has been hampered by illegal shootings, complaints from ranchers who have lost cattle to the wolves and removal of wolves that violated the three-strikes rule.

The Fish and Wildlife Service began backing off rigid enforcement of the policy this year.

Southwest Regional director Benjamin Tuggle in June allowed an alpha male wolf linked to four livestock killings to remain free in southwestern New Mexico.

He said the wolf had produced pups and removing him could hurt the program. Only the alpha pair of each pack has pups each year.

Two months later, Tuggle decided a wolf pack in the same area should stay in the wild despite the pack killing three cows in one month. He said the pack, which has since killed other livestock, was genetically valuable to the recovery effort.

The end of the rule leaves Fish and Wildlife with “extraordinary discretion over when to remove wolves,” said Michael Robinson of the Center for Biological Diversity, one of nine groups that filed the 2008 lawsuit.

While conservationists are pleased with the end of the policy, “there still could be (wolf) removals that cut into the prospects for continued recovery,” Robinson said. “It will require continued vigilance on our part.”

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Last month, the federal wildlife agency and the National Fish and Wildlife Federation signed an agreement establishing a trust fund to help ranchers deal with the impacts of wolves. It will compensate ranchers for wolves killing livestock, finance grazing techniques that prevent such kills and even pay for range riders to keep wolves from livestock.

“We hope it will develop some tolerance for the program among the community,” Buckley said.

The settlement also makes it clear Fish and Wildlife is in charge of wolf recovery.

Terms say the agency recognizes that the Mexican Wolf Adaptive Management Oversight Committee does not oversee the program. The committee was formed in 2003 to bring other agencies into the recovery effort, but environmentalists alleged Fish and Wildlife had ceded its authority to the committee.

Buckley denied that charge, citing Tuggle’s decisions to leave wolves in the wild although they fell under the three-strikes policy.

The next step will be a recovery plan for the species.

Environmentalists have pushed for a plan with criteria that would lead to the wolves’ removal from the endangered species list. Buckley said the effort will work with the states, tribes and others concerned with the program.